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Skepticism about Edén Pastora's 'crash' reflects his diminishing prestige

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The recent public controversy about anti-Sandinista military leader Edén Pastora Gómez, following the crash of his helicopter, indicates the extent to which Mr. Pastora's position and prestige have diminished since he broke with Nicaragua's ruling Sandinistas in 1981.

Costa Rican peasants who witnessed the crash in Santa Clara, on Costa Rican territory, some 30 miles from the Nicaraguan border, say two men walked away from the crash late Tuesday, shaken but apparently not seriously injured.

Pastora, the leader of the Costa Rican-based Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) showed up alive and well at one of his camps on the Nicaraguan side of

the border Thursday, according to a guerrilla spokesman. Earlier reports coming from sources close to Pastora said he had crashed on Nicaraguan territory and was feared dead.

The general skeptical response from former comrades in the now-fragmented contra movement and from the Central American public to his disappearance was perhaps best illustrated by a remark of his older brother, Felix, who belongs to a different contra faction in Costa Rica.

When asked Wednesday whether he thought his brother was dead or had really fallen into the hands of the Nicaraguans, Felix said, "If you people want to find my brother, go look for him in the bathroom of his house. . . . He wants to cover up his failures by lies."

Regional analysts suggest Pastora has lost influence because of political errors as well as his attempt to fight the Sandinistas without following the dictates of United States policy and the US Central Intelligence Agency. Pastora's detractors accuse him of chronic indecisiveness combined with an excessive sense of his own importance and wild exaggerations in his public statements.

Since refusing to follow US demands that he unite with a US-backed contra group based in Honduras — the Nicaraguan Democratic Force — Pastora has been cut off from all CIA funds and from most funding by wealthy conservative individuals. The military situation of the troops he controls has deteriorated correspondingly.

Pastora's position has been further complicated by the crash. His helicopter flight over Costa Rica violated that country's neutrality.